Hortin Jensen

Q Give a little bit of your background. Where you were educated and sort of the progression of your career, so we have an idea how that went.

Well, I, of course, I grew up in Salt Lake City and I was educated at the University of Utah I had a degree in Botany. I went, summer work with the forest service after graduating from collage and, and that summer I was given a research fellowship at Utah state University that's with the so called cooperative research units. So, I came back from the summer in Idaho, Idaho and went to school at Logan, got a Master's degree there.

Q What year was that?

Well, let's see, the University of Utah was '37 to 39 and then Logan was the subsequent two years so it would be 1940, '41 and from there I received an appointment with the food harvest section and the biological survey and that started my employment with the Federal government and then after, after spending a year or so there why that was when, just prior to World War II and I, I was called on active duty in 1941 I guess it was, when I was, when I was working in Washington, DC, I spent, I spent part of a year with the, with the military at Alabama, called on duty at Fort Meyer and then I was sent to Alabama to the, to the Air Force and there I had problems with my feet and my back and they discharged me from the Army, or from the Air Force and I came out here and they had a botulism program going on at the refuge and I was assigned to the sys for that and I graduated into a full time job but in the flyway situation and then I stayed in the flyway situation until I retired.

Q Where did you learn to fly?

I learned to fly locally here at Logan.

Q After, I mean in the '40's, you learned to fly in the 40's?

Yes, it was after I was, it was after I came back out of the military and was living here. I took training in Logan.

Q Was that the time that you worked on the alligator boat there on Bear river refuge?

That was, that was in the early days of botulism research out here.

Q Explain what the problems were and, and the final solution.

Well, the problem was you've got, if you've been out to the refuge you've got five units out there and there and they range in depth from a feather edge to about

two to three feet in depth, well conventional boats can't transverse and besides that they were full of pond weed so we speculated about what to do and finally it was suggested that we get an airplane engine so, I've got a picture of that boat. It's not a good picture it was published in popular mechanics but it was taken unbeknownst to me. I don't where, where the picture was taken whether we were making a trip from the refuge here to Tooly Lake, somewhere along the line somebody took a picture and published it in Popular Mechanics.

Q So what were the advantages of that boat besides getting to places? Was it good help in capturing geese for banding?

Well, yeah we, we were never with the refuge clientele out here. We were, we just had a laboratory out there and we, we perfected this airboat, with the assistance of an old time boat builder in Salt Lake. I went down, took leave and went down there and learned some of the trade from him, that came in handy later on and, where were, I kind of lost my train of thought.

Q About banding, banding --

Well, they used to use the refuge here. You, you could catch, drive the geese and then band them but the refuge when they are just transplanting geese to a newer area in the, in the planes they'd always ask Barry we're to supply them maybe 50 or 100 birds. Well, we had the boat one Saturday morning, we went out to the refuge to assist with, with capture of these geese but the refuge clientele weren't ready to work. They hadn't got up early that morning, so Cecil Williams and I went out, we thought well, we'd go out and see if we herd the geese. Well, we went out there and started herding the geese soon you'd see one would dive and then straight up, while he was down in the water I could step out of the boat and grab him. So, we caught 50 geese in about oh less then an hour I guess then the refuge group came down with all their paraphernalia, you don't need that we've already caught the geese and --

Q Do they still do it that way?

I'm sure they do. It's a very unique situation and the goose can't dive because the water's not deep enough and they can't get in, you can pick um. Well, of course you, you can also catch on, on a big reservoir by herding them into traps or they'll dive and if you keep (inaudible) to dive eventually he gets exhausted and you can just dip him out of the water.

Q Jim Boulger asked us to ask you about driving waterfowl, that you had a special technique of driving and trapping ducks for banding.

Well, we did that in Alberta and geese are banded at the refuge there every year or on and off every five or ten years.

Q When did you start flying as a flyway biologist?

Well, I did a little flyer here prior to it but I guess it was in the early, early '40's.

Q And where did you fly? Did you have a regular assigned place?

Well, here we were doing botulism research but we sort used the air craft to monitor incidents of botulism outbreaks and then we graduated from that into a full fledged flyway biologist.

Q Were you stationed out of Utah?

I was always stationed there. Well, after, after my time in Maryland and Washington, DC and Maryland and in the military and then out of the military, come out here and I've been here ever since.

Q When did you fly the northwest territories and up in the northern regions, was that before Alberta?

No, that's after.

Q So you began flying transects in Alberta?

That's right.

Q Could you describe a little bit how that was then?

Well, I, I flew transects in Alberta for about give or take 20 years or maybe more then that maybe, maybe. But, then I went north with, with Bob Smith and we covered the northern Alberta, part of British Columbia and northwest territories.

Q How was flying in those days? What kind of aircraft were you flying first off?

Well, of course I started with a Piper cub and we had a military surplus L5, Stinson L5 and then a, turned to light aircraft Cessna 170 and then eventually most of the flying was done with a Cessna 180 in Alberta.

Q Where the transects that you flew, had they already been set up as far as what the lines were?

No, they we set up by the, well, I don't know just how they were set up. They, statistically they divided the province into C, A, and B. C was the, was the dry southern part of Alberta and A was the intermediate area and B was the parklands of Alberta.

Q Was there a ground truthing crew on--

Initially there wasn't but then they soon started it, they had ground study area that would cover the same, same transects and we'd fly the aerial part of it.

Q Was there both a breeding population survey and a May survey as they do now?

Yes, there was a population survey in, in March, or in May and then bird count then in July.

Q Did you like it?

Well, yes, I had a choice out of an occasion because I was doing what at work what most people do on vacation and I've lost what I was going to say.

Q About how you felt about the kind of job and the flying in those days. It must have been exciting.

Of course I had a, I had an office out here in Bringham and my work was supervised out of Washington, DC so I never had a boss here so to speak, I just was on my own to do, to do the job and that's what I did.

Q Were you working on some research projects, besides the flying?

Well, I was, I was in the research division when I went to Washington and then I was with the research division when we were out here working on botulism but I think I'd have to check on the reorganization of the government but I went from the Biological Survey to the Fish and Wildlife Service to the Bureau of Sports, Fisheries and Wildlife and of course some of those changes were caused by Franklin Roosevelt.

Q I understand that you flew in Mexico?

Yes.

Q On a regular basis or just exploratory surveys?

Just on winter survey in January.

Q With whom did you fly?

With Bob Smith.

Q I understand that at one point he put the plane down, got in a tussle with some Mexican (inaudible)?

Well, I, we'd finished the day flying and I just got in the backseat and went to sleep and a few minutes later, well, I don't know how long it was maybe half hour, I woke up and when I went to sleep the land was on this side and the water was on this side and I woke up and it was just the reverse. I went up to the cockpit and asked Bob, I said what's going on here? And he said, well, I decided we couldn't get to Mazatlan before dark so I went over and I set it down here on this, this Lagoon and we'll spend the night here, see if we could get to Coolycaan. Well, there was about 30 miles I guess between where we landed and Coolycaan. So, we, we went into the village there, this was just a Mexican village with natives running around here, there and everywhere and so we, we couldn't get to Coolycaan so we, so we decided to see if we could get something to eat. I don't remember what we got to eat that night but we were there with the people in the village and there's no, I don't think there's any supervision or anything. They just made their own rules and regulations and I don't know whether they thought we were, were involved in some of these illegal importations from Mexico but anyway we were there and decided to go right back down to the airplane and sleep in the airplane, the fuse was big enough that you could do that and before we left, why this, you could hear a blood curdling yell and we were, had a couple of guys take us down to the, to the plane which was in the water and all we were there preparing to, to go to the boat, one of the guys there started to, after Bob Smith our chief pilot there and I just, well, I just fended him off and finally as settled down and we got, we got out to the airplane to spend the night but the, we didn't go to sleep that night until all the lights went out in the village and we took off in the, in the morning and you got the feeling you were there and the biggest guy was the one that controlled the situation.

Q They say you got a black eye?

Well, I got a little scratch on one side, I don't know if it was black but when we got to Mexico City, went to the Embassy we used to go to the consulate there, check in with them, we couldn't get them to get interested they just brushed it off, just forget it so that's what we did.

Q How was flying in Mexico those days? Were you working with Mexican authorities? Was there cooperation between?

We had, we had a Mexican observer on all the flights, nearly all the flights.

Q Because there's talk now of, of revitalizing, somehow making it more comprehensive, the surveys in, in Mexico. What kind of birds were you observing in Mexico?

Primarily, well, we observed lots of bird but the primary purpose was to observe waterfowl, duck and geese, and primarily ducks.

Q You also I guess, flew up in the northwest territories with Bob Smith?

Yes, yes, and then I flew alone with other, well with Jim Folger in the northwest territories.

Q How was that flying?

Well, it, it's interesting. You flying all day not treetop but just above treetop level at about, about 200 feet and observing the waterfowl that you observed, recording the waterfowl you observed at that time on transects.

Q Was it difficult? I can't image that there was a lot of gas of there and no weather reporting.

Well it got better, but yes I was, I was only refueled once out in the bush out of, out of Yellow Knife. I'm sure Bob, he, he initiated the work up there I'm sure that, that he had occasions where, where he, he'd have to stop, they'd have gas, gas cash, you had to make arrangements for gas and this summer for gas next summer. You had to arrange for your refueling what has to be done.

Q Were you flying transects there or cruising surveys or?

They were transects when I was in, in but Bob just did some cruising work, I think earlier looking for Hooping Cranes.

Q What do you think about all that survey work and it's contribution to the health of waterfowl populations? Did you feel you were really contributing or?

Well, of course when you're younger you think you're doing something but in my old age I kind of get the feeling if the waterfowl got along themselves and without help from us.

Q Well you must--

We might have made some, some indentation but the big problem is, is favorable weather conditions and that, that can weight more effect then anything.

Q Having harvest levels that ensured that they weren't over hunted was important and --

Well, that's true. When I first went to Canada the Pintail was the, was the dominant duck and towards the end of my, my days in the Service why, they've, they'd gone down hill to where they were, they were considered threatened but they when you consider the population in, in the 50's and then what they were in the 70's they've gone down hill even more so then Redheads, Redheads used to be common out here. They're not common anymore. We used to have molting

flocks of Pintails on the refuge out here but they, I'm not sure but I don't think they have them anymore.

Q Pintails are still in trouble.

Yeah, well, I don't know. You'd have to contact the local or the present enumerators. They talk about having increases, increases, increases but I don't see it on the, I don't see ducks to match their redireck.

Q Yeah, but it's still, I think there are more, they had a fall flight of I guess a hundred and ten million bird a couple of years ago and it's said that they're doing as well now as, as they've ever done this century as far as total numbers, not all species but --

I, I, I would question that.

Q Based on your observation out there?

The last time I went around the refuge out here, this is the Bear river refuge and since we weathered the high water that came due to a real big snow pack, it wiped out the refuge headquarters and went around the dike of the unit two which is the, the visitor's area and I, that's a 12 mile trip, I didn't see one duck. And so I just don't see, see the birds that they say exist, they've got to be someplace else then right here.

Q So go on a little bit with your career. When did you, how long did you do the flyway, where you a flyway biologist and flying up there in the northern?

Well, I'm just, just picking a, I'd say 25, 30 years.

Q What was the highlight of your career?

Well, I don't if there, just the whole sequence of events but I can't, I don't pick out one in particular.

Q Did you have fun? Was it a good career?

Well, yes I was out, out in the outdoors and going from place to place. I had a pickup truck and a, a boat, an outboard motor. I had an airboat and I had an airplane so I had all that at my disposal.

(Tape change)

--in the early 70's.

Q And so when you were flying in over that 20 year sections did you see regular cycles of wet and dry, talk about the changes that you would see?

Well, of course you had that cycle going on every year.

Q And the duck numbers fluctuated accordingly right?

Well, yes and then of course the, you --let me think, can't think what I was going to say.

Q Who all did you fly with over the years?

Well, I flew with a colleague here in Alberta, Al Smith and then I never, I don't think I flew any transect, I flew all the transects, I was a pilot for those transects in Alberta and I flew with Bob Smith in, in northern Alberta and the northwest territories and then he retired and I took over the, with the for but oh, I'd say six, seven years and then I retired.

Q When did you retire?

'75. I never thought I'd ever retire be have this long of a retirement as I've had, over 20, nearly 25 years.

Q That's terrific. Do you follow what's happening in, in waterfowl management or is it behind you? Do you keep up with it?

I lost pretty well, I pretty well lost all contact but I, I so I vouch for the conditions now.

Q When did you start flying with Jim Volger and--

That would be in the later years when I was flying with the Beaver in, in the northwest territories I guess it was after the, in the early 70's.

Q Do you have any stories from those days of flying in the northwest territories? You know, things that happened that were, that were interesting?

I can't think of things that stand out. You have to be able to ready your, you have to have good maps and be able to read the map to stay on, on your transect.

Q Who was I talking to? I guess it was Jim King about flying up in Alaska and there would be just these big blank spots on the map, you know, where they, where you just had--

That was true in the early days where you, but after World War II they, they photographed all that country and they had some pretty good maps.

Q Were the people in the northwest territories friendly? Were they helpful? Did they like to see your airplane come by or?

Well, I don't, we were friendly with the Canadian people working with the Canadian Wildlife Service but you don't have much contact with the people themselves because you're in and out everyday and, and I didn't have any incidents of any kind. Canadians are just like we are.

Q Was there support from Washington in those days for the aerial surveys?

Well, that's where all the initiative came was in Washington, in Washington. We worked with supervisors first the research branch and then the branch of, of management.

Q And what about the non-government organizations like Ducks Unlimited, were you working together with them or--

We had relations with them. We even banded ducks on some of their projects. But in the early days there was a little contention between the service and the, and Ducks Unlimited but that eventually evaporated.

Q What was the contention about?

Primarily duck numbers and things. They were trying to forecast and we were trying to make a forecast and they didn't always jive.

Q What did you do when you were in Washington? Were you at Patuxant?

Yes. I was in the, we were, started out in the south agricultural building on 14th street there in Washington and then they, Patuxent refuge was just being built but you add all the (inaudible) in the government offices you have just (inaudible) and food laboratory and I had a room all to myself, each one of us were individual, we had a room. They wanted to move them out to Patuxent so that they could have more office space so we were sent out to the (inaudible) when they first started to operate the, the Patuxent research refuge. It was being built when I was in downtown Washington but I eventually knew we'd be moving out to the Patuxent.

Q What sort of project were you working on?

Food habits, examining the stomach contents of, of big game, deer and, and sage grouse, whatever they had there, that was kind of a service organization. They'd examine things for, for states if states collected stomachs or they could send them in there and have them examined.

Q Primarily, what the animals were eating so they would know?

Yeah, that was eliminated in World War II they eliminated that so Patuxent had a different focus and much of it run (inaudible) on pesticides and that sort of thing.

Q You were studying pesticides?

No, I never did any of that.

Q When did you switch over, I mean from what you are saying is that your initial work was in keeping with your training as a botanist but when did you switch over to, to bird--

Well that was when I was assigned out here. The botulism pro, program while we were dealing with ducks and not the aquatic plants.

Q So there was kind of a natural transition, you went from, from working with plants, to out here working with plants and their effect on botulism with birds?

Yeah, yeah, yes. Just gradually gravitated towards a that side of the situation.

Q Did you miss being a botanist or?

Well, yes. The thing you miss is what you forget.

Q Did the botulism ever get fixed or was in cured or what?

I don't think to my knowledge they've never really figured out how a duck gets botulism. It occurs and they can document it but they don't know where, how the duck got, got the toxin to kill it.

Q Up in southern Alberta in Patalky lake--

Pacalky?

Q Pacalky, that's an area that is, keeps when the birds get in there they always get botulism. In fact, at one point I think they were trying to even to drain the lakes so that birds wouldn't come in and, and get sick.

Well, there's botulism all over California, Utah, the Dakotas. I don't know what they're researching now. The fellow that was heading up that research out at the refuge here died here about oh, I guess it will be about ten years ago. I don't, they've never replace him so they've transferred the work back to Madison, Wisconsin.

Q When you were flying was there a training program, mentoring program as they have now that, that like with Jim Bouldger you were showing them the ropes? Was it a structured kind of thing or how did that, how did the training of flyway biologists go?

Trained ourselves by doing rather then, there was nothing that would prepare you for it. You could learning to fly. I learned to fly on my, on my own, to get my pilot's license and then from there graduated into the flyway work.

Q Did you always want to fly?

Well, I don't think I had that kind of commitment. I wanted to fly to further the work. Well, all of, both of my (inaudible) state of the survey area you could, you could cover them by car. That's what they did the first year and they went to, went to aerial work that --

Q What's your legacy? What would you like to be remembered by as far as your work and the Fish and Wildlife Service?

Well, I don't know. I guess my work with the airboat. That, that airboat that's, where is it? In West Virginia?

Q Yes.

What's the name of the place?

Q It's called NCTC, which stands for National Conservation Training Center. All the Fish and Wildlife Service people go out there for, for their training and other agencies also.

Well, that boat is a boat that I built here in my garage.

Q Is there? Yeah that's what Jim said. Did you drag that boat around to other places to, to round up ducks or was it used primarily out here on the refuge?

Oh, the ones that were assigned to me, made annual trips to, to Canada. Used to trail it, put it on a trailer, trail it to various places for herding ducks.

Q I was reading where, where you'd get stuck in the mud and you'd use the boat to push the car.

Well, yeah that occurred one Sunday, we were driving through Alberta and it had rained and of course in there was no, Canada in the early days didn't have any paved roads, they had very few and we were running, actually leaving mud it looked like it but I guess it wasn't quite that deep but we were bogging down and

I was trailing the airboat so I started the engine up, I had the Canadian fellow that was working with me I said as long as we're going ahead you, you give throttle, to put the boat, and push the truck and we traversed maybe about ten miles of mud by pushing it with the airboat and well another time I wasn't involved with this but it was over in Manitoba and, in these years they, a lot of your game agents had Ford Sixes and Canada didn't have any Ford Sixes, so if they had broke down there were no way to get parts so I, one day I believe they were over in Manitoba, got the rig out on the highways, started up the aircrafts engine and Manitoba and went down the road with the airboat pushing the car. So it had various uses.

Q What did you use the airboat for up in Canada?

Primarily duck banding.

Q Duck banding?

Yeah.

Q So you'd use it, use it to drive ducks into traps?

Yes.

Q Explain that, how that worked.

Well, you'd have to build a trap with wings on it and then confine the ducks, you drive the ducks through the marsh and then as you get near the trap you have to make sure they hit the wings of the trap and then they just go in the trap and then you catch them that way.

Q These were flightless ducks, were they molting?

Yeah, they molting, that's would be. You couldn't, you couldn't drive the ducks around the lane.

Q Right.

So these were geese in molting, in the molting period and ducks in the molting period.

Q How many birds were you banding during a season, I mean was it prolific.

Oh, I lost track but we used to band about 500 Canada Geese out here at the refuge every year and those would be up wards in the thousands if we, if we were driving ducks.

Q What sort of a crew was working with you? How many people were involved and who were they?

Oh, you'd roughly have three to six.

Q Were there volunteers or Fish and Wildlife Service, Canadians?

No these were, these were either Alberta Game branch personnel or Canadian Wildlife Service people and Fish and Wildlife Service people.

Q How many ducks would you band in a day?

Well, that depends on how, how good you were at driving and catching them. I never, I've only had one experience in driving geese when I couldn't, couldn't convince them to go in the trap and that was an ideal situation as far as I was concerned we'd have the trap on dry land and you had water in back of it so they think they can escape. And I go up there in Mud lake at night I tried for oh, it seemed like an hour or more to get them to go in the trap and they wouldn't go in the trap but that's the only time I was unsuccessful in catch, catching geese.

Q They use, now they seem to use exclusively swim in, baited traps to capture birds.

Well, they were doing that then too.

Q They aren't in the molt, they are usually the Wood ducks that can fly because they band them and they fly away afterwards.

Well, I don't know what the relative, of course they started using dogs to catch young birds you know then I guess that went by the wayside but I could catch more ducks in an afternoon then they could catch all season with a dog, dogs.

Q Were they at that time, were they banding across the prairies. I mean how many banding operations were there?

Well, I think it was almost an annual event.

Q In Saskatchewan and Manitoba and?

Yes and Alberta.

Q Were you, at that time did you learn where the ducks were captured or harvested, the band returns?

Well, we, we did some work back at the banding office, that was largely taken over by the banding office and you got to realize that the banding office was at one time, wasn't, have all the sophistication they've got now.

Q Well, the banding office at this moment, isn't even with the Fish and Wildlife Service anymore, it's part of the, the USGS, US Geological Survey, I mean it was one of those bureaucratic shufflings that they did in the last administration.

I hadn't heard that.

Q It is silly. But one of the changes that, that is working very well with the banding is that there's an 800 number on the band so, people don't have to physically send in, they can call in give the information so they're getting a much higher rate of return then they used to.

More power to them.

Q Are your airboats being used out here anymore or?

Yes, of course they're used in the Florida everglade but that's a different, different situation where you're driving through marshes where you can't see, in regular boats you can't see out because you've had too many bull rushes in front of you but there's bigger boats set up on a high chair so that they can see where they're going.

Q Was yours the first airboat? The, the push boat or were they doing that in the everglades back then?

No, we preceded them by 20 years I guess.

Q So you were the very first, very first that used a push--

Let me, let me show you.

Q Talk about that fish and where you filmed it.

That was on the east arm of Great Slave lake.

(Side B)

Q Can you say that again?

I've got a better picture, wait a minute. That's the--

Q That's the first one, right?

Yes. That was just made from a boat we had, had here at the refuge and that's 40 horse power airplane engine and we had, no one even noticed it but we put little out riggers here on, on the boat on both the sides to make it stable. That was (inaudible) December of '43.

Q I like the name of it, Alligator.

Well, there's a story that goes with that.

Q What is that?

Well, there's a better picture of that. There's a banding, carrying the wire, the main (inaudible).

Q Explain the picture, where it is and what you're doing. The one that Claire is holding.

Well, that's on a, maybe a DU project, it's out in Alberta and they're using the airboat to, to transfer the roll of the wire that we're going to make the trap out of. I can't seem to -- That's a picture from Mexico but that's-- here's the one you want, it's that one. Those are firearms as they confiscated.

Q From you?

No, in Mexico for illegal hunting.

Q What year was this? When was this?

Well, I, I hesitate to put a time on it except to say that it was probably in the '70's, or 60's.

Q Tell the story about how the alligator boat got it's name.

Well, Cecil and I were, were casting about, figure out what we would do with, how we could get a boat to traverse the mud flats out there and the, there was jealousy between the research branch which we were and the refuge branch which was managing the refuge and Dr. Caughtum well, we, we built this first boat, a couple of research biologists built this first boat and, and then we got, even saw a professional boat builder in Salt lake to build, to build this boat here.

Q Oh, this one?

No, this one. That's the first boat that was built as an airboat, that one right there.

Q And the year was? 1951.

No.

Q Did I see that here?

That would be after, I had pictures that would be from 1944, I guess.

Q 1946? Does that make sense?

Probably earlier then that, '44, right after.

Q Again you were in the midst of a story about how the boat got it's name.

Yeah, well we, we were somewhere, I can't, we got this boat and, and in determining what we wanted we sent a request into the research branch or to the Washington office that we wanted a boat that would go several miles an hour, travel over mud flats and so forth and A.C. Almer who was in, in refuges at that time, he wrote a letter out in reply to our request. He said, tell those boys what they can do is go to Alligator, go to Louisiana and get an alligator and ride it and that, that's how come it got it's name Alligator.

Q Were you upset when you heard that?

Well, amused is probably a better word.

Q I mean that was a joke right? Or were they serious?

Well, --

Well, lets see the Havalen Beaver and of course the orange and white color is also previously been applied to other service aircraft, the goose and our Cessna 180's.

Q Is that the model?

This is the Havalen Beaver.

Q When did you fly that?

In 19--early '70's.

Q In the northwest territories or where?

Yes, primarily in northwest and in Mexico.

Q Was it a good plane? Talk about that.

Oh, yes. Very stable, forgiving.

Q Is it an amphib or is it just on floats?

This one, this one is just on floats but the one we had, had amphibious floats so you could but the wheels down and land in the water.

Q Talk about the paint scheme.

Well, I just designed it for the 180 and then it was, it was gradually put on the other, other aircraft.

Q Why did you select the orange?

Well, it's a standard color with the, the FAA, supposed to be the most visible.

Q Does that bring back good memories?

Oh, yes.